

Joy Banks African American College Students' Perceptions of Their High School Literacy Preparation

Upon entering college, some African American students experience difficulty with literacy tasks requiring text analysis, active problem solving, and critical thinking. Many of these difficulties can be traced to the high school as the source. To understand some of the underlying causes for this situation, phenomenological interviews were conducted with eleven first-year African American college students to examine their high school preparation. The students' reflections offer three key findings that have implications for strengthening college-level literacy: (a) students often perceive their literacy preparation as inadequate; (b) students believe that teachers' assumptions about them impact their academic self perception; and (c) students actively developed academic strategies to remain successful.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2001) found that after high school only 17% of African American students were able to demonstrate effective literacy skills as characterized by ability to find information and understand, summarize, or explain moderately complex texts. More alarming is that the National Assessment for Educational Progress (2002) reports the average reading proficiency score for African American twelfth-grade students has declined over the past decade. Upon entering college, these students exhibit lower literacy proficiency as implied by their average verbal Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) score of 433, as compared to a score of 529 earned by average white students (NCES, 2001). In addition, 62%

of all entering African American college students require remedial instruction in English as compared to 22% of the total college population (Hoyt, 1999; Roach & Finney, 2000).

Educators and researchers continue to identify factors that contribute to limited literacy proficiency among African American students. Issues such as language and communication style and culturally relevant teaching practices are dominant themes in research on African American literacy performance. However, few studies include the perceptions of students when determining the influence of language, school preparation, and culture on literacy performance. Focus on these factors without student input may hinder identification of factors that most significantly affect literacy performance of African American students.

Much of the research on literacy performance of African American students has centered on themes of language competence related to the acquisition of reading skills and school performance. According to Smitherman (1977) some linguists and historians have characterized the speech patterns of African Americans as imperfect imitations of Standard English. These claims have spurred a "deficiency" model of literacy performance. This model implies that if African American students are to enhance their academic standing they must first learn to speak Standard English. Farkas (1994) reinforced this notion when he concluded: "one begins to believe that African American students' relatively poor reading performance is due to their relatively meager exposure to standard English rather than because they are *not smart*" (p. 32).

Other researchers have reasoned that the underperformance of African American and low-income students is a result of shortcomings in urban schools. For example, Oakes (1995) found that: (a) minority students are significantly under enrolled in advanced placement courses even when such courses are available; (b) minority students are referred less often to advanced courses although they may meet the necessary criteria; and (c) minority students are likely to exclude themselves from advanced courses to remain with social peers. This situation may inhibit attainment of literacy skills developed through advanced texts, dialogues, and critical thinking strategies.

A different perspective on school climate is presented by Delpit (2002), who suggests that African American students' under performance in literacy is due to a school atmosphere absent of meaningful cultural representation and a lack of general appreciation for diversity within many schools. This shortcoming creates in students an attitude of resistance and alienation toward the curriculum (Delpit, 1995; Fine, 1987; Harris, 1990). To overcome this attitude Lee (1995) found that classroom factors can promote students' literacy skills when students are able to

(a) communicate and work in small groups, (b) integrate analogies from text that relate directly to prior knowledge, and (c) rely upon their own language styles and social knowledge to interpret text meanings. African American students must see themselves as intellectually capable and culturally valued if they are to succeed in literacy tasks (Perry, 2004). This is accomplished through deliberate curricula connections with real world experiences relevant to students.

The consequences of limited academic literacy among some African Americans is not only felt at the college level but is compounded when one considers that high levels of literacy are associated with gainful employment, advanced educational goals, and acquisition of quality of life (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990). In a study of the relationship between post-high school employment and literacy, the National Center on Education and the Economy (1990) found 41 % of adults who demonstrate low literacy proficiency are living in poverty. Given the importance of advanced literacy skills in African American students in higher education and the workforce it is necessary to strengthen literacy preparation in high school and college contexts. While researchers have suggested intervention strategies at both levels, approaches that bridge the two experiences for African American students are overlooked. The students, themselves, are key to resolving this issue. Their perceptions might influence how school preparation can be transformed to promote language and literacy development.

To better understand the implications of this context, eleven African American first-year students were interviewed using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The students' perceptions and assumptions about literacy preparation were documented as they grappled with literacy requirements in Freshmen English. The following research questions were addressed: How do African American first-year college students perceive their high school literacy preparation? What factors do African American first-year college students perceive as necessary for college literacy success? How do African American students develop strategies to cope with the transition from high school to college English classrooms? By questioning the students' perceptions of literacy preparation, the findings can (a) add to our understandings of African American students' experience in the college-level English classroom, and (b) improve upon the current theory and instruction used in both high school and college English classrooms to more effectively assist African American students in reading and writing development.

Method

The study was conducted at a large four-year Northeastern university.

The freshmen class at the university consisted of 3,233 students, 5.4% of whom were African American. African American students graduate from the university at an expected rate of 17% after four years, compared with 40% of white students. Because of a high attrition rate as well as other factors such as: low family income, first generation college student, ethnic minority status, or low standardized test scores, African American students were considered at-risk.

Students were identified by faculty in the English Department and through the office of Student Support Services. Faculty and students were provided with written consent forms which offered an overview of the study. Criteria used for student-participants were that students had to be African American, first-time freshmen students from urban high schools who were enrolled in Freshmen English.

The two courses in which students were enrolled were *English Through Writing* and *English Through Literature*. Each course was designed according to the university's curriculum for freshmen English seminar. Courses were designed to focus on the development of students' writing skills through revision and reflection, an understanding of themselves as writers and thinkers, thus instructional methods encouraged students to become more powerful and self-aware writers, readers, and thinkers. The ethnic backgrounds of the student population in the English courses were representative of those within the entire university. That is, each of the ten classes used in the study consisted of approximately 1 African American, 2 Asian, 1 Hispanic, and 21 European American students. Two students in the study were enrolled in the same class.

Participants

The African American students in this study brought different experiences to the college environment. Four of the students were African American males and seven were African American females. All of the students attended urban high schools that were predominantly African American and Hispanic. Two of the students attended public charter schools, one student attended a public magnet school, and the remaining eight students attended local public schools. Students' high school grade point averages ranged from 2.7 to 3.5. Verbal SAT scores of the students ranged from 428 to 490. Eight of the eleven students completed a university remedial English course due to their low SAT score. Despite their diverse backgrounds students shared a similar desire to have their experiences acknowledged. One of the students explained that she "want[ed] people to know that the transition from high school was difficult." She continued by stating, "Some students don't think about their educational experience. They just accept what's given to them."

Data Collection

Phenomenological interviewing “assum[es] that through dialogue and reflection the quintessential meaning of [participants’] experiences will be revealed” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 72). This approach was employed to engage eleven African American first-year college students in in-depth conversations about their perceptions of high school literacy preparation. Each student participated in three individually scheduled interviews and one focus group session. Interviews began with a cohort of five students during the fall semester and continued with six students during the spring semester. Each interview engaged students in three 90 minute interviews (Seidman, 1998). The first interview engaged students in a guided conversation in which they reflected on their high school reading and writing experiences. The second interview focused on the student’s current attitudes and perceptions of their transition into college level English courses. Specific focus was given to their academic preparation. The third interview included a self-assessment of their perceived ability to meet the demands of the college English course. The final interview also included students’ perceptions of factors that contribute to literacy success in college. Twenty-five open-ended questions were developed prior to the interview; however, not all questions were asked of all students (see Appendix).

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred throughout the study. Consequently, information gathered during the interviews, field notes, and a focus group influenced classroom observations and visa versa. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed. Prior to the analysis of readings and coding multiple listenings of the interviews were conducted by the researcher (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). The purpose of the four listenings was similar to those of the three interviews, to establish the participants’ personal history, develop details on their interactions in literacy environments, and allow for reflection upon those details.

Phenomenological methods of narrative analysis began with broad patterns and themes (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Themes related to African American students’ literacy success formed the basis for the analytic framework. This framework guided the analysis and organization of emergent themes, such as social attitudes toward literacy, general social supports, perceived ability to become literate, and efforts to seek assistance. Emergent themes were retained or eliminated based upon the recurrence of each theme. After each interview, an analytic memorandum was completed to summarize the interview, identify emergent themes, assign initial coding, and identify areas for further investigation.

Trustworthiness

Students' written assignments, interviews, and classroom observations were used to triangulate the findings, thus developing converging lines of inquiry through the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 1994). Additionally, member checking was used during the second and third interviews. Students reviewed the analytic memos to ensure that emergent themes were accurately identified and to ensure the initial analysis of their experiences.

Results

The comments of African American students in this study provide guidance to teachers and others who aspire to improve the literacy performance of African American students in urban high schools and colleges. Themes resulting from the interviews were divided into three categories: (a) influence of teacher expectation; (b) influence of social comparison; and (c) coping strategies.

Teacher Expectations

Teacher expectation greatly contributed to students' perceptions of literacy preparation. Students reported that teachers in their urban high schools had low expectations of them, did not encourage critical thinking, and used only passive-receptive instructional styles. According to several students, teachers' low expectations resulted in a teaching approach which promoted rote memorization, explicit retelling of comprehension details, and over emphasis on product completion instead of the development of style and voice in written assignments. Tracy, a second semester freshman, elaborated:

In high school all you had to do was read the story. The teacher would go over what she was looking for so when you took the test you just had to remember what she told you earlier. It was so simple! You didn't have to analyze anything. All you had to do was remember what she said in class.

Students attributed their high school academic success to the lack of challenge presented by teachers. As a consequence, students did not think their high school grades were valid. Nicole, a student from an urban charter school, discussed the frustration of receiving inaccurate evaluation from high school teachers and principals:

It's really frustrating when you're in high school and all the teachers and principals said, "You're smart." I didn't feel that smart. I don't know why they felt that way, maybe because I was getting good grades, but it wasn't challenging. So I didn't feel smart. It's when you're challenged and you're doing a good job and then you feel like you've done something.

Another student attributed his college literacy frustration directly to high school teachers' misperceptions and low expectations, "I don't think my high school prepared us enough [for college.] I don't feel like I got the same education, as students in other schools. My high school was just basic."

The students frequently mentioned that race may have influenced the high school teachers' evaluation of their literacy performance. Family members and teachers with high expectations assisted students in developing a more accurate view of their literacy performance and overall capability. Tracy and Mark attended the same high school. Mark made the following comment:

I don't think they (teachers) compared me to other students in my high school. I think they compared me to other minorities at my high school, but if I compared myself to everybody else, I would say I was average. My teacher's would say "Your grades are perfect," but I remember when my grades slipped to a 2.9, my parents lost it!

Tracy agreed that some teachers in their high school had lower expectations for African American students:

Most of my teachers thought my writing skills were great. I got an A on every single paper. It was real easy. But once I had a southern black woman [English teacher]. She took no mess from anyone. She was preparing us for college. All the other teachers were very lax, but she wasn't. If you didn't read, she knew you didn't read. Very few people got A's in her class.

Many students commented on the level of teacher expectation in college, which was notably higher than that experienced in high school. Students reported differences in teachers' level of academic expectation, instructional styles, and use of course content. The texts introduced in the students' college English classrooms often incorporated various genres, historical time periods, and multiple perspectives of ethnically diverse writers. Students were required to utilize multiple frameworks to analyze implicit themes within complex texts. Teacher-student interactions were also unique in that students were expected to provide individual perspectives of the texts, as opposed to repeating teacher-directed responses.

Students experienced low levels of teacher expectation during high school literacy preparation. In college, the students were forced to reconcile the tension between their high school preparation and college expectations. The literacy experiences of which the students spoke highly were those in which teachers and parents provided students with academically challenging tasks and valued their potential to excel.

Social Comparison

Social comparison worked as both a hindrance and source of motivation as students began to view literacy as a series of complex interactions that require text analysis, consideration of historical perspectives, and incorporation of personal background. The students indicated that more European American students came to college more prepared to handle the English material. In addition, students often reported frustration with the limited literacy success they experienced in college as compared to the success experienced in high school. They believed themselves to be above average when compared to their high school peers, but low average when compared to college peers.

All students discussed how various high school academic placements can affect college literacy performance. The students perceived high school Advanced Placement (AP) courses as most effective for college literacy preparation. Advanced Placement courses were believed to provide students with reading and writing experiences that paralleled those in college. Increased levels of teacher expectation, additional focus on written assignments, exposure to social and cultural topics, and scaffolding of critical thinking skills were attributes believed to increase the college literacy performance of AP students. Starr, Janet, and Demetrius reflected on the influence AP courses had on high school peers presently enrolled in college:

I was in a good English class, but it wasn't AP. So I feel that they are a bit more advanced than me. I know AP was the same thing as college English, as far as analyzing stories.

I had a few friends that were in AP English. That class was more similar to the college structure. I see most of those people, who were in AP classes, doing a lot better than students who weren't. I think they were pushed more. More was expected of them.

In AP classes they teach you critical thinking. I didn't think about that until now, AP students are more prepared and have more of an advantage.

While students did believe that AP students were better prepared, they also believed that college literacy success is a combination of school district affluence, teacher expectations, and social stereotypes. Students who attributed their literacy development to these factors generally believed they had the intellectual ability but were not provided with the high school resources necessary for college success. Jalil's comment emphasized the impact of teacher stereotypes and student outcomes:

I think money changes the teachers' frame of mind. It's more about spending, and that's related to higher expectations. In my school, teachers might not feel we have the potential to learn and they let

it be known to the students. The students might not feel that they have the potential either. So it goes back and forth. But in suburban schools, their schools are better, because it's a fact their students are better prepared for college. I don't think I was prepared for college. Students from Green Valley (affluent school district) come prepared. I have a little more catching up to do. I'm not saying they're brighter, I just know that they know a little bit more than I do.

Some other students internalized their lack of preparation. For students who internalized their lack of preparation, peers who were better prepared for college were believed to be more academically confident and competent. Students also reported that better prepared students were able to negotiate the assignments more easily. As a consequence, these students were often reluctant to participate in peer editing sessions or during classroom discussions for fear that others would believe they did not belong in college. Michelle and Octavia commented:

The other people in my English class seem very confident. When I read their papers I always think, 'Oh my, my paper does not compare to this.' That's why I hate sending my papers out [for peer editing]. I don't want them to think I don't belong in college, because I feel so much less advanced.

Some of the students read better than I do, at least they sound pretty smart in class. When they read the story, doors open to them that explain it better than when I read it. They just understand it better than I do.

Students struggled to complete assignments with the same level of academic success as their college peers. Many of the students mentioned feeling angry and short-changed by their high schools, but remained motivated to achieve. Matthew explained:

I feel like I learned absolutely nothing in high school. This is so different from what they actually teach in high school. So, I'm going to have to do a lot work. I feel like I'm behind and you don't want to feel that you have to catch up to everyone else. I just get so overwhelmed.

Nicole also reflected on the sense of being cheated.

I feel cheated! In high school you have to take all preparatory and academic classes for college. It's supposed to help you. Then you do well in those classes and you think college is going to be easy. It's so different here. It's nothing like what they taught you in high school.

Interestingly, students did not compare themselves to other African American students. Moreover, students did not discuss their academic performance with other African American peers. The students were able to recognize characteristics of high school preparation that contributed to the academic success of their peers. Students remained frustrated

that they were not able to maintain the same academic status that they achieved in high school. Students also capitalized on this frustration to remain motivated to increase their literacy performance.

Coping Strategies in the College Classroom

Despite the frustration of limited high school preparation, once experienced in the college English setting, the students developed a variety of academic and personal strategies to compensate for lack of literacy preparation and to negotiate college teaching styles. Students developed specific strategies based upon their evaluation of personal strengths and weaknesses. Many of these strategies included spending more time on reading and writing assignments. Janet and Matthew noted spending more time on assignments:

When I read I take a lot more notes. I used to just read. Now I look for the main ideas and write in the margins. I make pencil markings, circles, and stars as I read the text. I write little notes in my notebook. For assignments, I pick out quotes. I analyze [the text] a little more. In high school I didn't proof read. I used to do my papers in one night. That's how easy I thought they were. I could write a paper in one night and expect to get a good grade on it. Now [in college] I go to the Writing Center. I access other people's opinions.

In-class strategies implemented by students included active listening. Gilbertson (2002) described active listening as a method of "listening-in" on discussion, or classroom dialogue, so that the learner may gain new understanding of the topics. Students who were most apprehensive about their participation in classroom discussions used this technique. Most of the students used active listening to enhance vocabulary and increase knowledge of topic-centered classroom dialogues. Nicole and Tracy explained:

I think that my vocabulary isn't as advanced as other students. When I talk out loud it doesn't sound as good compared to when I write on paper. When I hear other people talk and use words I pick up on their language. That's the way I learn. I can read a book and look up the words and I still won't learn them. I'll look up a word and two sentences later I'll lose it, but if I hear someone use it out loud I'll understand it. That is very important to me, hearing other people talk. You have to be more cautious [in college English]. So, I don't say anything. I don't want to come off looking like I don't know anything. So I don't really participate in class because I'm not sure of myself. I'm not sure if what I'm doing is correct. Of course, the teacher says everyone has their own interpretation of the reading, but if you say something that the other students disagree with they'll jump all over you. So I don't say anything. I just listen.

Conversely Starr and Mark employed verbal participation as a primary strategy to increase their reading and writing skills.

In high school I never talked. I think that's a big part of being literate being able to express how you feel. In order to do that in English you have to speak up in class, so I do that. I do that more in college since more is expected.

I question the teacher a lot. If I don't believe in something somebody is explaining in the text I'll question him or her about it. [In high school] I just went along with it because I thought the teacher was always right. Now since I have a variety of books and resources I take a different perspective or a different point of view.

Some students who used active listening as a primary strategy elected to participate in class discussions when the focus was on the African American experience. Tracy stated that she participated during these class discussions because she believed that other students would not challenge her:

If I feel strongly about something then I'll participate, but for the most part I just listen. I was most confident in class when we were discussing Langston Hughes and the [college] instructor asked should we have black history month. Most of the students in the class said no. They were just being really ignorant. So, I told them how I felt. Of course, they weren't going to argue with me. That was the one time I said something in class.

Starr also spoke about how the choice of classroom text influenced their contribution to classroom dialogue and reading and writing performance:

[I'm interested in] books that are about trying to change situations. There is one essay we read in freshmen English the author was Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. I got a B on that paper! I was able to relate to the topic and that helps me bring out more points. If I can't relate to a reading then I don't really see a point in writing about the topic.

As evidenced in these comments, students developed strategies that varied according to their perceived academic strengths and weaknesses. All students reported spending more time on reading and writing assignments than they did in high school. They believed that verbal participation is necessary to remain successful in the college classroom. Most students, however, believed they did not have the verbal skills to participate during class discussion therefore they actively listened. In addition, culturally relevant course content enhanced their participation and confidence.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore literacy experiences contributing to African American college students' reading and writing success. It is likely that some African American first-year college students have dissimilar experiences. For example, the students in this study established strong connections with university-sponsored programs intended to support African American students' success in academic and social endeavors. Additionally, nine of the students participated in a 6-week summer program that required weekly contact with supportive university staff and other underrepresented students. It is possible that African American students who do not have a similar network of support would have different experiences. Nevertheless, the results of this study have implications for educators who teach African American students.

Experiences described by the students reveal that they understand the magnitude of high school literacy preparation and its contribution to literacy performance in college. One of the convincing themes related by the students was the negative consequence of low expectations that some high school teachers have held. The students' perspectives of teacher expectation support the claims that it is not African American students' lack of capacity to learn that limits their academic success, rather it is the quality of instruction that most influences academic outcomes (Hilliard, 2002; Texeira & Christian, 2002).

Students also acknowledged a difference in literacy preparation based on high school English placement and the affluence of various school districts. Participation in AP courses was believed to better prepare students for success in the college classroom because of AP assignments that nurture critical thinking on a variety of topics. Students believed peers from affluent school districts did not suffer from negative stereotypes which hinder exposure to complex texts, critical thinking, and challenging curricula. The students' experience with high levels of anxiety and self-doubt in the belief that faculty and peers may question their legitimacy as college students is consistent with findings of other studies (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Smedley, Myers, Harrell, 1993; Steele, 1997). Regardless of their limited high school literacy experiences, students remained confident of their ability to achieve literacy success in the college classroom. Student awareness of the difference in preparation and the benefits of high school AP courses is important for improving African American students' literacy performance in the college classroom.

Students' anxieties also influenced their academic strategies in the college classroom. A few students used their verbal skills to demonstrate their understanding of the written assignments. Other students focused

their efforts on listening to peers during class discussions in hopes of enhancing their literacy skills. Students reported verbally participating during classroom discussion on topics that related to the experience of African Americans. If students are to develop more effective strategies, it is important that they understand the influence of ethnicity, schooling, and teacher expectation on their college performance. Study groups which provide learning strategies, challenging discussions on the expandability of intelligence, and on the historical under preparation of students in urban schools might help students to cope with the anxieties created from lack of adequate literacy preparation provided in many urban schools.

Implications

The perceptions of African American students regarding their high school preparation are critical elements in addressing the literacy crisis of African American students as they enter the college classroom. The data suggest that some high school and college teachers may need to develop instructional strategies which explicitly acknowledge and enhance African American students' literacy potential. Also, curricular changes are needed to provide African American students with equitable levels of expectation, culturally rich text experiences, increased classroom dialogue in which students may include their personal experiences, as well as opportunities to develop critical thinking skills related to reading and writing. It is ultimately the combination of teachers' levels of expectation and curricular modifications that will appropriately prepare African American students for literacy success.

The data suggest that African American students in urban high school settings may not be receiving literacy preparation equal to their peers who attend schools in financially affluent school districts. Despite limited high school literacy preparation, the first-year African American college students in this study used their triumphs and frustrations as motivators to remain academically successful. Educational opportunities made available to students in urban high school and college settings must exemplify a commitment to equal and equitable access to knowledge, skills, and information. African American students must perceive, and know, that their literacy preparation appropriately provides them with the vital skills that lead to endless possibilities toward academic and professional goals. Accomplishing this goal may require uncomfortable dialogues between teachers and students to improve teacher expectation, selection of curricula, and classroom dialogues which enhance critical thinking.

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Appendix

Student Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your high school English classes.
2. Tell me what it means to be a good reader.
3. Tell me what it means to be a bad reader.
4. Tell me what it means to be a good writer.
5. Tell me what it means to be a bad writer.
6. How do you describe yourself as a reader? In high school? In college?
7. Tell me why you believe your reading skills are good/bad.
8. How do you describe yourself as a writer? In high school? In college?
9. Tell me why you believe your writing skills are good/bad.
10. How would you describe your overall academic skills?
11. What did your high school English teacher think of your reading and writing skills?
12. What factors do you believe contribute to reading and writing skills?
13. What does your college English instructor think of your reading and writing skills?
14. Have your literacy skills changed since entering college? If so, how?
15. What do you believe makes an assignment easy or difficult?
16. Tell me about a time when a college English assignment was frustrating.
17. Why did you think it was frustrating?

18. Tell me about a time when a college English assignment was easy.
19. Why did you think it was easy?
20. Who or what has been most significant in helping you develop literacy skills?
21. Have you shared your English assignments (papers) with your peers? Why? Why not?
22. What factors have contributed most to your changes in literacy attainment in college?
23. What do you believe would need to occur to receive more positive evaluation from your current English instructor?
24. What do you believe would need to occur to lower your apprehension toward English assignments?
25. Is improving your literacy skills important to you? Why? Why not?

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